

When I got the call from Nils that his burning hot combo «Root70» was about to hit the studio in Berlin to record a new album I wasted no time in getting my ticket and when he casually mentioned that it was to be a Blues album my curiosity soared. Over the ten years I had known this band I had come to expect surprises, but a Blues album? I had to be there.

It was my first time in Berlin and a friendly Armenian taxi driver took me from the airport to the mysterious studios of the old GDR Radio, the directions to which Nils had meticulously sketched out by hand on his fax to New York. It was a bitterly cold January night and the snow was piled high around the imposing walls of this old radio fortress. After a long odyssey and many false turns I finally caught a glimpse of a cigarette under the beautiful full moon. I stepped out of the taxi and heard the voice of Jochen explaining how to make the perfect apple vodka cocktail. I was in the right place.

The band had just arrived from their tour of White Russia and were setting up in the huge recording hall of these old radio studios. I had some time to check in with Nils who told

me a little more about the program. The Blues album was to be the second of Root70's conceptual works and featured, alongside the compositions of the leader himself, works by all the members of the quartet. He introduced me to the team of engineers and tape operators, Jochen kindly produced one of his aforementioned cocktail creations, and I sat back and took in what was to be a long evening of scintillating first takes.

On the flight from Newark to Berlin I had taken a bit of time to map out what I understood as Blues. Sure, we all know the 12 bar form in the century or so of Blues making, but what was it in its essence that this quartet was further distilling with their jazz alchemy. Was it a feeling, an attitude, a simple harmonic progression? Reducing it to its lowest common denominator and listening to all eleven tunes on this record, I found it to be a kind of post modern wailing, a new take on pain and longing, and a reinterpretation of the age old pull of the dominants - those Grand daddies of gravitation, the 4th, the 5th and good ol' tonic, where our Mother's cooking is always waiting for us. The tunes themselves are universes apart in style and feel and yet these factors seem to form a thread through this lush forest of sound.

The slick jazzers from Root70 had a plan on this winter night and that was to play the program as they had done night after night on their recent tour. This meant opening with «Rusty Bagpipe Boogie», a Boogie Woogie tune penned by Chisholm, who told me later that it was named after a «Scottish Karma Sutra position». Now this lad has built a bit of tradition of sexual innuendo in his song titles (think Dragon Pearl Massage Music, Introducing the Ambassador) and on further pressing he replied that it may have something to do with a belated backlash to his strict Presbyterian upbringing. That aside, the tune is a gloriously laid back start to the record. Wogram's plunger mute work kick starts the groove and I could hear the muffled gasps of delight from the otherwise prudent engineers- the tiny bells on Rueckert's sticks were weaving their magic, there was something happening here.

I had exchanged the cocktail for my pen because the band was clearly on fire, the tunes were being carved into the spinning tapes at great speed with only the odd break to change the tapes. This record is a true first take wonder and a tribute to a combo at the height of their powers, flexing their muscles and cracking their jazz knuckles playfully. Next up was «One

for George», a slick medium-up Blues by Wogram that sported a more robust downtown New York feel and some delicious tempo changes under the alto solo.

«Listen to your Woman» by Wogram was next on the set list and proved to be for my ears a real tour de force in which the band leader really let his writing chops hang out and sway proudly in the breeze. The 12 bar blues form is transformed profoundly in this work and all of a sudden we find ourselves in a minor 9 sharp 5 wonderland with Wogram underwriting Chisholm's sweet alto work with his deftly double-tongued melodica and Rueckert nimbly shifting from swing to straight - simply gorgeous.

I didn't have to wait long for a work of bassman Penman's and boy, was his a foot tapper! «How Play Blues» kicks off with a catchy bass riff and one by one the boys hop on Penman's Hallelujah steam train to Alabama. He lets his horn team slide up and down in microtones, all the time powering the band on with his huge bass sound. The tune has a classic feel to it and as the boys rip through their respective solos in a tidy tempo, I could feel the ice melting outside.

In the first short break, the German engineers caught their first shut eye of the day on the nearby couch, Nils began casually shaving away his 3 day stubble, Penman re-oiled his bass strings and answered a few gig request faxes, and Rueckert began mixing more drinks and was cajoling the alto player into getting himself better life insurance and a decent retirement plan. Root70 has been together as a band for ten years now and it is delightful to observe the playful interplay, onstage and off.

A working band is a working band and a twelve minute break is more than enough to refill these grunting jazz engines. Back in the steam room Nils calls off a chart of his called «Homeland Sky», a sweet medium slow tune which takes an unusual twist in the middle. Chisholm gets a chance to flaunt his vocal skills as he gives off a beautiful rendition of a text inspired by Swiss writer Robert Walser. I think I can make out the sonic hue of Rueckert's apple vodka, deep within Chisholm's resonant bass voice. Definitely one for the ladies.

A quick tape change later and Nils was counting off «24», a sleek blues vehicle to proudly display the group's microtonal

chops, already well laid out on their previous record. This is followed by «Hot Summer Blues», another Wogram tune which opens up on the Mongolian plains with an overtone overture and then moves into a fast minor blues with some tricky bar changes. The two horns spar it out on the solo form, picking up playfully on each other's riffs until the melodic foam is spilling over and the tempo is truly sizzling.

I sometimes have to keep reminding myself that this is a Blues record- the tunes are so wonderfully varied and the next one is no exception. Chisholm opens «Behind the Heartbeat» up on his Jamaican melodica and a deep reggae groove is soon underway. After some beautiful drum work moving in and out of the tempo the tune shifts up a gear and Wogram blows a robust solo over a swinging minor blues while Rueckert really tells it like it is here.

It's been too long since we were lucky enough to hear a song penned by the playful drum cub with the swinging roar. His was up next, a wickedly complex 21/8 number which he titled «Erectile Dysfunction». I had enough

trouble getting my teeth around the form, let alone the title. Even here, in this complex field of sound which evokes northern Swedish folk music in its major/minor tonality, I could still make out the pattern of the blues given away by the bass figure. The horn solos were framed by Reuckert with vastly different textures and his own polyrhythmic solo was the cream tip on the pie, his deft arms peppering the vintage Gretsch set with syncopation- nothing dysfunctional in that part of his body, that's for sure.

The stove was heated on the next number as the band dropped their up-tempo tune. A trading between the drums and horns kicked off «Precision» before the main head was deep fried in the heaviest swing I've heard in a while. Wogram introduced a clever little motive at the end of the A part to switch tempos between the soli and the results are delightful. Right throughout this session and indeed throughout the history of this band I can pick up an element of playfulness- it may be drenched in irony and soaked in swing, but it always keeps us on the edge of our seats licking our lips and begging for more.

Close to midnight and the band was just about to put an entire album on tape in a matter of hours- this is what you call a working band. «Melancholia» was the final Oeuvre tonight and it features a beautiful bass solo over some trombone multiphonics, the absolute summit of understatement meeting technical mastery. The blues are strong again in this number, the cry from within, the eternal lament, it can all be heard in each one of these men's voices.

The last chord is a major one, or is it? The trombone drops off the major third ever so slightly. There's a long silence then a collective breath. The engineer removes the last tape from the reels and places it in it's metal case. «What shall I call it?» he asks through the talkback. Nils leans forward and whispers into his Neumann: «Listen to your Woman».

Ahmet Shabo, NYC February 2010